

# *White Noise:* Representations of (Post)modern Intelligentsia

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I will suggest that the importance of a rereading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) lies in a (re)interpretation of its (post)modern hero's social role and his inability to develop a capacity for free self-expression under the alienating socio-cultural conditions of (post)modern consumerism. Further, I will argue that his alienation is inseparable from his role as a (post)modern Foucauldian "specific intellectual" who has lost the critical vision of the Sartrean "universal intellectual." My contention is that a (re)reading of *White Noise* cannot but be critical of the "grand narrative(s)" of the (post)modern condition, and thus underlines the importance of the advancement of human emancipation in the alternative programmes that are *not* offered to Jack Gladney – the protagonist. Within this (re)reading falls Gladney's quest for meaning and his role as a human agent. I will therefore compare his role – as a (post)modern intellectual – with that of James Joyce's modernist hero, Stephen Dedalus.

What is Don DeLillo's hero in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney's socio-intellectual dilemma? Or rather, in what circumstances is his consciousness formed? Taken further, what epistemological and intellectual categories does he – as a (post)modern bourgeois subject – represent? These are questions about the social character of specialized intellectual categories in (post)modern society and thus of the role of knowledge in an advanced capitalist society – as represented in *White Noise*.<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci's persuasive statement that "[in] the modern world the category of intellectuals . . . has undergone an unprecedented expansion" (1986:13), and his distinction between "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals are central to any understanding of the role of the intellectual in *White Noise*. Gramsci maintains that

[e]very social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said asks similar questions in his article "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community":

What is the role of humanistic knowledge and information if they are not to be unknowing (many ironies there) partners in commodity production and marketing, so much so that what humanists do may in the end turn out to be a quasi-religious concealment of this peculiarly unhumanistic process? (1992:251)

homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. (1986:5)

But at the same time this social group inherits certain categories of intellectuals from the pre-existing social structure. The new categories are the “organic” intellectuals of the new mode of production; the old are the “traditional” intellectuals who are divorced from the immediate social struggle of history and who represent continuity between the older form of society and the new. By intellectuals, Gramsci does not refer to those who exercise thinking – “all men are philosophers” (1986:323) – but to those whose social function labels them as intellectuals, i.e. who, due to the social division of labour, have specialized functions.

According to this Gramscian formulation, Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist* can be considered an organic intellectual who refuses to be a clergyman, an intellectual who defends the values of the rising monopoly capitalism in its political rule and ideology against the traditionalism and conservatism of market capitalism and feudalism altogether. By implication, Dedalus defends the division between mental and manual labour: he is the intellectual/god who thinks, creates, and rules. That is, he is an “autonomous” subject who is not a member of the human forces of production, but rather an intellectual who maintains the hegemony of the rising ruling middle class. By the same token, Gladney in *White Noise* is another “organic” intellectual who exercises a specialized intellectual function in accordance with the new form of the capitalist mode of production that possesses unprecedented dynamic accumulation of profit which forces constant changes in all other spheres of production. The constant renewal of the division and redivision of labour in his world, in accordance with the constant renewal of conditions of production, requires the substitution of new skills for old and therefore more specialized “organic” intellectuals. However, while Dedalus was needed as a modernist intellectual in order to defend the mode of production that is associated with individualism and modernity (and in order to produce knowledge standards that legitimize this mode), Jack Gladney lacks such a social function since culture, in his world, can no longer claim to be “autonomous” from capital. To quote Eagleton, “in the post-war West, culture has become for the first time in the modern epoch a vital force in material reproduction as a whole, firmly locked into the commodity production which, in the era of high modernism, it characteristically disdained”

(1999:2). Unlike Dedalus, Gladney cannot claim to be a god pairing his nails away from mundane issues. Dedalus's "distance" from the world enables him to formulate a form of critique of its ideological apparatuses, i.e. family, religion, education . . . etc., whereas Gladney's intellectual activities are another modality of exchange-value, namely commodities. To put it differently, the world(liness) of *White Noise* is represented as an extension of that of *A Portrait* in its reflection of the dominant mode of production and the ideologies that justify and resist it. But at the same time both worlds are represented to be different in terms of the micro-phenomenon that inhibit their worlds and the intellectual activities that go along with them. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, the concept "postmodernity" is associated with anxiety that

rises from the feeling that the kind of services the intellectuals have been historically best prepared to offer, and from which they derived their sense of social importance – are nowadays not easy to provide; and that the demand for such services is anyway much smaller than one would expect it to be. (1988:219)

Why not, then, create Hitler, and Elvis, Studies Departments, and monopolize them in an attempt to be marketable and to avoid what Bauman calls, a "status crisis"? (1988).

From its inception, *White Noise* emphasizes the relationship between Gladney and the Hitler Studies Department. Of course, the reason behind this emphasis is the fact that Jack Gladney is represented as the narrator who tries to control the events. Thus the reader is given the information Gladney is supposedly willing to give. However, what I am trying to deal with here is not only what Gladney, in the text, tells me, but also with the way the novel itself – as a representation of the American late-capitalist (post)modern world – should be read, that is, with an emphasis on questions of history and ideology. In 1968 Gladney, as a representation of an intellectual, seems to have understood that he is not needed anymore to offer "authoritative solutions to the questions of cognitive truth, moral judgement and aesthetic taste" (Bauman, 1988:219). His previous Dedalusian historical role, namely legitimating authority and capitalism, was weakened because, as Bauman puts it in his discussion of the role of (post)modern intellectuals, it no longer mattered

for the affectivity of the state power, and for the reproduction of political domination in general, whether the social area under domination [was] culturally unified and uniform, and how idiosyncratic [were] the values, sectors of this area may uphold. (Bauman, 1988:221)

Significantly, at the beginning of the novel, he says:

When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities. It was an immediate and electrifying success. The chancellor went to serve as advisor to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria. (4)

The fact that the state has found other means of legitimation and domination has left the (post)modern organic intellectual with no material basis upon which s/he can claim a Dedalusian "autonomous" authority. Culture, as portrayed in the world of *White Noise*, is assimilated into the market, which shapes tastes, values and attitudes. Why not, then, teach Elvis, and Hitler, in order to keep up with market demands? It follows that the role of the (post)modern organic intellectual is to cross the thick line between "mass culture" and "high culture," and to legitimate and institutionalize "mass culture" in order to justify her/his co-option by the logic of the market: whatever the market decides goes. That is why the chancellor of the college "was quick to see the possibilities," that is, the profit that the college would get from the Department.

It is noteworthy that the Hitler Studies Department shares a building with the Popular Culture Department which is known officially as "American Environment" (9). The teaching staff in the Popular Culture Department "is composed almost solely of New York émigrés, smart, thuggish, movie-mad, trivia crazed," and the reason why they are here is

to decipher the natural language of the culture, to make a formal method of the shiny pleasures they had known in their Europe-shadowed childhood – an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles. The department head is Alfonse (Fast Food) Stopmanato, a broad-chested glowering man whose collection of prewar soda pop bottles is on permanent

display in a clove. All his teachers are male, wear rumpled clothes, need haircuts, cough into their armpits. . . . (9)

The intellectual's role is not to raise the popular taste any more, nor is it to debate serious literary issues like Dedalus's debate on Byron. Rather, the staff members in the Popular Culture Department have a conversation about using fingers instead of a tooth brush, about "crapping in a toilet bowl that has no seat," about James Dean's death, "jerking off," peeling flaking skin, and the like (66-69). Very significantly, one of them says:

These are the things they don't teach . . . Bowls with no seats. Pissing in sinks. The culture of public toilets. All those great diners, movie houses, gas stations. The whole ethos of the road. I've pissed in sinks all through the American west . . . This is what it's all about. The great western skies. The Best Western motels. The diners and drive-ins. The poetry of the road, the plains, the desert. The filthy stinking toilets. . . . (68)

The underside of the glamorous American west is filth. But does that, by implication, suggest a radical intellectual consciousness? Or rather a nihilistic, pessimistic view of life? Or an awareness of the antithetical poles of (post)modern civilization? An awareness of the contents of a suppressed unconscious which "they" do not teach? Is it not instead an unconscious self-defence of the role of the intellectual, and the extent to which s/he can reach, i.e. teach, "the ethos of the road" and "the culture of public toilets?" This is the kind of questions the novel – in its representation of (post)modern intellectuals – requires us to answer. However, it is noteworthy that it never offers explicit answers to such questions.

Murray's reasons for wanting to open an Elvis Department are a good starting point in formulating some of the answers to the questions concerning the development of intellectual categories in (post)modern society. It is significant that he, as a Baudrillardian (post)modern intellectual, is the one who relates Elvis to Hitler. In response to Gladney's question about the Elvis Department, Murray has this to say:

You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or

university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the centre, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you. The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies. It has identity, a sense of achievement. You've evolved an entire system around this figure, a structure with countless substructures and interrelated fields of study, a history within history. (11-12)

Jack Gladney's dilemma, then, is not only individualistic, but also a general one that reflects the loss of direction that the (post)modern intellectual suffers from, and the complexity of the quality of being "organic." The above conversation in the Popular Culture Department, and the creation of Hitler Studies and Elvis Studies, are indications of the extent of the (post)modern intelligentsia's internal collective crisis, namely its loss of confidence in its previous Dedalusian role(s). Obviously, the counter-intellectual implications of the conversation above are the product of the replacement of "traditional" academic intellectuals with an "organic" intelligentsia. It is for this reason that the allusions to TV talk shows, detective stories, tabloid magazines, and radio programmes are ubiquitous in the academic and non-academic world of *White Noise*.

To what extent are the specialized "organic" intellectuals in the novel necessitated by the requirements of late capitalist hegemony? Edward Said, in a different context, argues that "culture works very effectively to make invisible and even 'impossible' the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other" (1992:249). Hence the creation of specialization and professionalism: Hitler is Gladney's Hitler, and Elvis is Murray's Elvis. Gladney and Murray are the professional experts who have created and monopolized the fields. It is for this reason that Gladney does not want anybody to notice that he does not know German; he, secretly, takes private lessons in order to be able to present a paper at a conference on Hitler. The same logic applies to politics where "insiders" know how things work and the public is left ignorant.<sup>2</sup> Significantly,

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<sup>2</sup> Said argues strongly that the intellectual centre in America is filled by an unquestioned ethic of objectivity and realism, based essentially on an epistemology of separation and difference. Thus each field is separate from the others because the subject matter is separate. Each separation corresponds immediately to a separation in function, institution, history

the former chancellor of the college where Gladney works has served as adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter: he became an “insider.” Moreover, Gladney’s numerous references to Hitler in the text do not include any direct ideological references to Nazism, or to the political struggle against it, or even to the political economy which produced it. Rather, the field is about Hitler’s personal life, artistic failure, his relation to his mother, and the like. This is, undoubtedly, the product of the sharp “division of intellectual labour” which makes the study of Hitler exclusive of any ideological characteristics. As Said would put it (1992), it is an *apolitical* and *ahistorical* field that requires only experts to unfold, and its mission is to represent “non-interference” in the affairs of the everyday world. Thus, the definite function of the Hitler Studies Department is to represent Gladney’s marginality, which is also “to preserve and . . . to conceal the hierarchy of powers that occupy the centre, define the social terrain, and fix the limits of use functions, fields, marginality and so on” (Said, 1992:257). And that is precisely why Gladney’s “organicity” – as a representation of a (post)modern intellectual – is a complex issue.

It becomes clear, then, that part of Gladney’s dilemma is his confinement to Hitler’s “disciplinary ghetto,” and its relation to his unanswered universal questions about life, family, TV, fear of death, and death itself. Neither “objective” professional experts, nor nuns offer him a comforting answer. The university and its “professionalism” offer him a theory detached from praxis, a mechanical “objective” discourse that never answers existential, social and political questions. However, it may be argued that his alienation is the product of his will to connect theory with praxis dialectically in order to get answers, or rather his desire for a concrete immediacy to his theoretical understanding of the world. The separation between everyday life, i.e. praxis, and theory leads to disillusionment and pessimism. Theory in his world always precedes praxis, if praxis is ever achieved. When he ultimately tries to unify them, he fails because his theoretical orientation (or rather Murray’s) is not the product of experience.

In a very significant discussion between Gladney and Murray about the fear of death, the latter convinces the former to be a “killer” rather than a “dier,” and to use violence in order to resist death. However, Murray assures Gladney that he is “talking theory”: “two academics in an intellectual environment. It’s our duty to examine

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and purpose. Each discourse ‘represents’ the field, which in turn is supported by its own constituency and the specialized audience to which it appeals. . . . (1992: 256)

currents of thought, investigate the meaning of human behaviour . . .” (291). Further, his emphasis on the “purely” theoretical aspect of their discussion is deliberate “We’re *talking* theory. That’s *exactly* what we’re talking. Two friends on a tree-shaded street. What else but theory? Isn’t there a deep field, a sort of crude oil deposit that one might tap if and when the occasion warrants?” (291-2) More significant is the seeming self-consciousness that he shows in his attempt to define himself in response to Gladney’s questions about killing:

I’m only a visiting lecturer. I theorize, I take walks, I admire the trees and houses. I have my students, my rented room, my TV set. I pick out a word here, an image there. I admire the lawns, the porches. What a wonderful thing a porch is. How did I live a life without a porch to sit on, up till now? I speculate, I reflect, I take constant notes. I am here to think, to see. Let me warn you, Jack. I won’t let up. (293)

In other words, no one can “catch” him adopting a political or a moral position; he is an interpreter whose task is to read signs, interpret but never mean what he says and never connect his interpretation to any political and social praxis. His dominant role is thus primarily interpretive, rather than “legislative.”<sup>3</sup> He is only a sign theorizing about other slippery signifiers that have no fixed signifieds. To say that he means what he says and to take him for his words is to commit him to meaning and, thus, to practice, which he – as a representation of a Baudrillardian (post)modern intellectual – totally rejects: he “won’t let up.” Within this context of praxis-theory dialectic, Said writes:

. . . to move from interpretation to its politics is in large measure to go from undoing to doing, and this, given the currently accepted divisions between criticism and art, is all the discomfort of a great unsettlement in ways of seeing and doing. . . . (1992:258)

My contention is that the ethical questions *White Noise* poses about the intellectual’s responsibility are inseparable from the macropolitical phenomenon with which it

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<sup>3</sup> Bauman distinguishes between the intellectual as a “legislator” and as an “interpreter”; he argues that the latter has displaced the former in the advanced capitalist society (1992).



deals and in which its characters are embedded. Thus, in order to understand Gladney and Murray's problematic relation to the praxis of (post)modernism, one needs to historicize the theory-praxis dialectic. With the development of capitalism to its third stage, the separation of the "practical" from the "intellectual" has become a major feature – as the representations Gladney and Murray's characters show. This has "freed" material production from ethical and political responsibilities in the process of becoming a seemingly "pure," "objective" commodity affair. Consequently, knowledge becomes a commodity and "autonomous" fields separate from the material basis of society. Knowledge, in other words, becomes fragmented knowledge(s), such as that produced by Hitler Studies, Elvis Studies, Car Crash Seminars, Popular Culture. Put differently, what we have is a separation of knowledge and thought from other realities, including social and political realities. The claimed "autonomy" and "purity" of the different fragmented fields of knowledge is undoubtedly the same as the separation of "theory" from "practice." Murray's claim that he is "only talking theory" is an overt denial of the ideological function of his theorization. That is, his "theory" is a thought of a "practical," albeit a thought which claims to be unconscious of its practical basis. However, in implementing this theory, on the individual plane, Gladney comes to understand that it is limited to the only existing forms of knowledge available in his world. Generally speaking, as Lukacs argues, the production of such thoughts is done within the intellectual framework of existing social relations, not separate from them; such ideas are produced in a way that covers the "totality" of which they are part (Lukacs, 1971). In this context of *White Noise*, it is late-capitalism with its reification and the power of commodities that direct human agency to the isolated, fragmented units because (wo)man is claimed to have no control over the "natural" world of commodities. Thus, Gladney's and Murray's ability to comprehend the world becomes a difficult task as a result of "confinement," "specialization," and – significantly – "rationalization" (Lukacs, 1971:102).

Dedalus's purpose in establishing a unique individuality and enhancing human freedom, knowledge, and universal truth – called "grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment" by Lyotard (1984) – is confronted with the threat of extinction under the attack of competence and localization. Hence, Gladney's search for concrete universal experience in order to confront a universal threat – death. However, his marginality, powerlessness, fragmentation, and his "local" experiences, deny him the "independence" that Dedalus has had. Fundamental to this comparison

between Dedalus and Gladney is Foucault's argument concerning the role of the intellectual in the twentieth century. The reason I am referring to Foucault's argument is that it claims to follow, historically, how this role has radically changed from "universal" to "specific":

For a long period, the intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice . . . To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all . . . Some years have passed since the intellectual was called upon to play this role . . . Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the "universal", the "exemplary", the "just-and-true-for-all", but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them . . . This is what I would call "specific" intellectual as opposed to the "universal" intellectual. (1980:126)

Thus, according to this Foucauldian theorization, there is a distinction between Dedalus, as a critical-universal intellectual opposing the existing order at the turn of the century, and Jack Gladney, as a "functional intellectual" (Kellner, 1998d) legitimating the values of the late-capitalist consumer society. Gladney, in other words, is a mere "expert" on Hitler's life – an "expert" who does not question the value and the social and political dimensions of his activity. While Dedalus is committed to opposing all patriarchal macro-institutions, to fighting for freedom, to speaking for humanity; Jack Gladney can only intervene on issues and debates related to Hitler and the university, i.e. to micro-institutions. However, Foucault's theorization fails to address the manipulation that Gladney's "specificity" is confronted with. That is, while Foucault privileges the political role of the "specific" intellectual, he fails to see the negative side of this "specificity," namely, its inability to address universal issues and its reconciliation with the privileges offered to it within the social structure of late-capitalism (Milner, 1994:91-2).

On the other hand, Gladney's sole alternative, as an intellectual trying to avoid extinction, while being challenged by the mass politics of representations embodied by the media industry and the simulacrum, is to dispute the image and the slippage of the signified, to question what the TV offers, and to look for an alternative politics. Thus, he takes the decision to act in an attempt to unify theory with practice, albeit on

the individual plane.

First and foremost what Gladney needs to confront, as a specific intellectual who is no longer a consensus-builder is his lack of what Said calls “. . . critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do . . .” (1994:17). However, the question is whether Gladney can be an independent intellectual in a mass media society. Can he regain his Dedalusian “autonomy” and simultaneously retain his position as a university teacher? Is he not looking for a programme of opposition within the “specific” intelligentsia, a programme that he cannot find because of the lack of universal experience of the “specific” intellectual? Does he not – to some extent – conform to the requirements of his position for its privileges? Said’s question as to “whether the individual intellectual as an independent voice can exist at all [nowadays]?” is an extremely important one in contextualizing the above questions (1994:51). Independence in this regard never means disengagement, but rather the ability to resist hegemony, avoidance of conformity to power, and the ability to offer alternative(s). With the disappearance of the ideas of enlightenment and emancipation, commitment and engagement, these questions become more complex, but crucial, for Gladney to answer since he is expected to be presentable as a Chair and as a marketable professional whose knowledge is limited to Hitler’s life. However, his confinement to Hitler Studies conflicts with his persistent questions of death, and hence, by implication, life. This conflict is a sign of the possibility of the rejection of conformity to the standards set by the late capitalist market and its control over academic institutions. Differently put, Gladney’s “specificity” as an intellectual does not offer a satisfactory alternative to what Dedalus represented at the turn of the century. But, Dedalus’s illusions, as a representation of a modern intellectual, on the other hand, do not offer us answers about the (post)modern world. Hence the necessity for Gladney to develop a normative concept of what Kellner calls a “critical public intellectual” (1998d) – an intellectual who will be able to deal with the issues Gladney’s “specificity” cannot address. According to Kellner, the critical public intellectual

intervenes in the public sphere, fights against lies, oppression, and injustice and fights for rights, freedom, and democracy *a la* Sartre’s committed

intellectual. But a democratic public intellectual does not speak for others, does not abrogate or monopolize the function of speaking the truth, but simply participates in discussion and debate, defending specific ideas, values, or norms or principles that may be particular or universal (1998d:3)

Gladney cannot be a copy of Dedalus in the sense that he cannot abrogate the right to speak for all since he is represented as a white middle-class American professor living at the end of the century. His confinement to Hitler Studies, which embodies the interests of late-capitalist ideology, is dialectically related to his role as an agent of the market. Obviously, his exposure to the toxic cloud event, and his attempt to kill Mink, trigger an oppositional awareness. My contention is that the historical passage from Dedalus's world and intellectual formation to that of Gladney's in its rejection of consensus on what "objectivity," "reality," and "universal knowledge" are, should not necessarily lead to total nihilistic and pessimistic views, nor to escape from moral and political positions. To put it in Gramscian terms, Gladney's "pessimism of the intellect" should be linked to Dedalus's "optimism of the will."

Gladney's dilemma is, then, his inability – as he is confined to the Hitler Studies Department – to grasp the world. And grasping the world is undoubtedly an uneasy task especially if it is a highly commodity-producing world, a world of a manipulating simulacrum, of distorted communication, a media-led world, that is, a world of white noise.

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<sup>4</sup> Princess Diana's funeral is a case in point.

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